

Testimony in Partial Support of the
Governor's Proposed Midterm Budget Adjustments
Sarah Esty and Cyd Oppenheimer, J.D.
Appropriations Committee
February 21, 2012

Dear Senator Harp, Representative Walker, and members of the Appropriations Committee,

I am testifying today on behalf of Connecticut Voices for Children, a research-based public education and advocacy organization that works statewide to promote the well-being of Connecticut's children, youth, and families.

We applaud the Governor for including important increases in funding for quality and access in early care and education programs, and we urge the Appropriations Committee to support his vision. We strongly support the \$4 million funding increase for the creation of 500 new preschool slots in Priority School Districts, the \$3 million for professional development for the early childhood workforce, the \$5 million (in bond funding) to create a tiered quality rating and improvement system (TQRIS), and the \$5 million (in bond funding) for facility improvements and minor capital repairs to licensed School Readiness programs and state-funded day care centers. We are also pleased to see the Governor's budget offered a slight increase in funding for Care4Kids for an overall increase of \$6.8 million from FY 12 levels.

We further support the Governor's proposal to maintain funding in a number of other important programs, including state-funded child care centers, School Readiness programs in Competitive School Districts, Family Resource Centers, and State Head Start Programs. We are pleased that funding for the Nurturing Families Network, which provides intensive home visiting for new, high-risk parents, and the Help Me Grow program, which identifies children at risk for developmental or behavioral problems and connects these children to resources, will also be maintained at originally budgeted levels. We urge the legislature to maintain these funding levels in their final budget.

We are concerned about the proposed \$2.3 million cut to the Children's Trust Fund, which would completely eliminate funding for Family Empowerment, Family School Connection, the Children's Law Center, and General Fund support for the Kinship Fund,¹ and ask the legislature to consider restoring these important programs.

Increased Access

There is great unmet need for access to affordable, quality early care programs, which the proposed budget begins to address. **The dedication of 500 new School Readiness slots is an excellent first step at providing access to preschool for the approximately 10,000 three- and four-year-olds in struggling families who currently do not receive any state subsidy to assist with early**

¹ See Dannel Malloy, "FY 2013 Governor's Midterm Budget Adjustments" (February 8, 2012) at B-92 and B-95, available at http://www.ct.gov/opm/lib/opm/budget/2012_midterm_budget/pdfs/fy2013midtermbudget_forweb.pdf.

care and education.² Too often expansion of early care and education is thought of only in terms of increasing the number of slots available, without recognition of the need for additional facilities and qualified teachers which the additional slots will require; we applaud the Governor for not making this error and emphasize the necessity of the Governor's proposed funding for professional development and facility improvement in conjunction with the proposed funding for additional slots.

Increased Quality

Research shows that high quality early care programs help close the preparation gap for low-income children,³ and are a critical part of closing the racial and economic achievement gaps in Connecticut. **The \$5 million in funding for the TQRIS in the Governor's proposed budget will allow Connecticut to make important strides in increasing the quality of care for all the children it serves.** The TQRIS will enable child care providers to be recognized and compensated for increased quality, creating incentives for greater quality in all programs, and will furthermore provide transparency that empowers parents to choose higher quality options for their children. Additionally, our timely implementation of such a system should make us more competitive for future federal funding if it becomes available.

The increased funding for professional development is another critical piece of quality improvement. Experts have found that children experience better outcomes when served by teachers with a B.A. and specialized training in early education.⁴ P.A. 11-54, *An Act Concerning Requirements for Early Childhood Educators*, which passed last session, recognized this finding by setting rigorous educational standards for early childhood educators. However, given the low salaries of early childhood teachers, and the current educational status of much of the workforce, the goals set by P.A. 11-54 will only be attainable if the state provides financial assistance to its early childhood professionals. Demand for scholarships through Connecticut Charts-A-Course vastly outpaces the current availability of funding, attesting to the high degree of interest amongst early childhood educators to improve their skills and access higher education.

Furthermore, we are pleased to understand that **some of this money will be used for professional development for family child care workers**, many of whom care for infants and toddlers without

² We define struggling families as families with incomes at or below 75% of the state median income (SMI), which is the highest level of Care4Kids eligibility in recent years. See Sarah Esty and Cyd Oppenheimer, "Connecticut Early Care and Education Progress Report, 2011" *Connecticut Voices for Children* (December 2011), pg 6, available at: <http://ctkidslink.org/publications/ecereportcard2011.pdf>

³ A study of Oklahoma's high-quality preschool program found that children eligible for free lunch saw the greatest gains from preschool, followed by children eligible for reduced price lunch, then children not eligible for reduced-price lunch. Black and Hispanic children saw greater gains than their white peers. See, William Gormley and Deborah Phillips, "The Effects of Universal Pre-K in Oklahoma: Research Highlights and Policy Implications," *Center for Research on Children in the United States, Georgetown University* (October 2003), available at: <http://fcd-us.org/sites/default/files/EffectsofUPKinOK.pdf>

⁴ "Children whose assigned teachers had more education and training achieved greater gains in cooperative behavior, task persistence, and school readiness than children whose teachers had less education and training." See, Deborah Lowe Vandell and Barbara Wolfe, "Child care quality: Does it matter and does it need to be improved?" *U.S. DHHS, Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation*. (May 2000), available at: <http://aspe.hhs.gov/hsp/ccquality00/index.htm>. See also multiple studies cited in Howes C and J Brown, *Improving Child Care Quality: A Guide for Proposition 10 Commissions*, in N Halfon, E Shulman, M Shannon and M Hochstein, eds., *Building Community Systems for Young Children*, UCLA Center for Healthier Children, Families and Communities, 2000, 6, available at: <http://www.healthychild.ucla.edu/Publications/Documents/Improving%20child%20care1200.pdf>

access to the skills advancement options available for workers in center-based care. The most extensive brain development occurs between birth and age three, so it is vital that we not forget our youngest children when seeking to improve quality across our ECE system.⁵ Research shows that it is critical to provide quality early care experiences for our youngest children, especially those most at-risk, to support and enhance this brain development, which forms the basis for future learning.⁶

Increased Compensation

As we increase quality, we must also increase compensation for those who provide care. Connecticut is one of just three states receiving federal Child Care Development Block Grant funds that have not raised their reimbursement rates for child care providers since 2002.⁷ The federal government recommends that states set reimbursement rates at the 75th percentile of current market rates, which would allow families to access three out of four slots with their subsidy. Our state's rates are far below the federal recommendation. For example, the reimbursement rate for a four-year-old in North/Central Connecticut in center-based care is 40% lower than recommended.⁸

Raising reimbursement rates will allow families to access more high quality child care options, and will allow providers to attract and retain well-qualified staff, both of which will go a long way to closing the preparation gap that exists at kindergarten between our better-off and at-risk populations. Furthermore, increased compensation will provide the financial resources necessary for early childhood educators to meet the rigorous educational credentialing requirements of P.A. 11-54 and accommodate the workforce expansions needed to support the School Readiness slot expansion.

We recommend that the legislature earmark the \$6.8 million proposed Care4Kids funding increase specifically for raising reimbursement rates. This would be a small first step towards meeting the federally recommended standard, one that would demonstrate the legislature's understanding of the need for and implications of raising reimbursement rates, and its commitment to so doing.

Continuing Need for a Coordinated Plan

While we support the Governor's early care and education funding proposals, we emphasize that they address only discrete elements of the broader coordinated and comprehensive early care and education system Connecticut is designing under PA 11-181, *An Act Concerning Early Childhood Education and the Establishment of a Coordinated System of Early Care and Education and Child Development*, which passed last session. This law established 25 components the system needed to address, which

⁵ See, for example, Jack P. Shonkoff and Deborah A. Phillips, eds. "From Neurons to Neighborhoods: The Science of Early Childhood Development," (Washington, DC: National Academy Press), 2009

⁶ See, for example, Masse, L. and Barnett, W.S., A Benefit Cost Analysis of the Abecedarian Early Childhood Intervention (2002); Karoly et al., Early Childhood Interventions: Proven Results, Future Promise (2005); Heckman et al., The Effect of the Perry Preschool Program on the Cognitive and Non-Cognitive Skills of its Participants (2009)

⁷ See Table 4A: State Reimbursement Rates in 2011 in "State Child Care Assistance Policies 2011: Reduced Support for Families in Challenging Times," *National Women's Law Center* (October 2011), available at: http://www.nwlc.org/sites/default/files/pdfs/state_child_care_assistance_policies_report2011_final.pdf

⁸ See Table 4C: State Reimbursement Rate Amount in 2011 Compared to Market Rate Amount for Child Care Centers in "State Child Care Assistance Policies 2011: Reduced Support for Families in Challenging Times," *National Women's Law Center* (October 2011), available at: http://www.nwlc.org/sites/default/files/pdfs/state_child_care_assistance_policies_report2011_final.pdf

reflect eight broader fundamental principles that have been identified through high-quality research and input from Connecticut's ECE community. These elements include:⁹

1. Uniform reporting requirements for providers;
2. Blended and braided state and federal funding sources to allow early care and education providers to access a single funding stream;
3. *Fully* funded services for children aged 0-8 based on evidence and research as to the real cost of high quality care;
4. A quality rating and improvement system;
5. Means to develop our early childhood workforce and improve this workforce's compensation;
6. Coordinated data collection that ensures that data is complete and transparent;
7. Uniform standards for early learning that are developmentally appropriate; and
8. Improved outreach to and access for parents.

We believe that we are most likely to achieve a functioning early care and education system if all of the elements of such a system are designed and/or reformed pursuant to a coordinated plan, rather than developed piecemeal. We continue to support P.A. 11-181 and reiterate our hope that the planning director whom it calls for (a position half-funded by philanthropy) will be hired quickly, so that the process can move forward in coordination with the Governor's important proposals.

⁹ These eight fundamental elements were determined through collaborative research and discussion between Connecticut Voices for Children, the Connecticut Early Childhood Alliance, Connecticut Parent Power, and the Connecticut Association for Human Services (CAHS). *For more information, see Annemarie Hillman and Cyd Oppenheimer, "Connecticut Early Care and Education Progress Report, 2010," Connecticut Voices for Children (February 2011) on pg. 28-30 (available at <http://ctkidslink.org/publications/ece11progressreport.pdf>). See also, "It's About the Children! High Quality Early Education for All Children," Connecticut Voices for Children, the CT Early Childhood Alliance, CT Parent Power, and CAHS (Summer/Fall 2010). See also "It's About the Children! Ensuring Connecticut's Kids Are Healthy, Safe and Ready to Learn," Connecticut Voices for Children, the CT Early Childhood Alliance, CT Parent Power, and CAHS (Summer/Fall 2010) (available at <http://icareaboutkids.com/pdf/aboutchildren.pdf>).*